

## News and Reports

### Companion animals

#### Dog bites: a complex public health issue

##### Abstract

The first 'UK Dog Bite Prevention Week' was introduced on June 6 and 7 with a two-day conference hosted by television presenter and dog trainer Victoria Stilwell in association with the University of Lincoln. The event attracted a mix of academic and professional speakers as well as delegates from a wide range of backgrounds. Rachel Orritt, who is researching the perceptions, assessment and management of human-directed aggressive behaviour in dogs at the University of Lincoln, reports on the proceedings

TWO hundred and fifty people attended the National Dog Bite Prevention and Behaviour conference, including vets, behaviourists, teachers, groomers, police officers, emergency service personnel and researchers, to learn about the individual prevention and national management of dog bites. Speakers at the meeting, which was held at the University of Lincoln, also came from a range of disciplines, including Daniel Mills, professor of veterinary behavioural medicine at the University of Lincoln, Trevor Cooper, a solicitor with a particular interest in the law relating to dogs, and Kerstin Meints, professor of developmental psychology at the University of Lincoln.

Despite the diversity in perspectives, there was a great deal of concordance between speakers regarding dog bite terminology. Veterinary behaviourist Kendal Shepherd argued that the term 'dog attack' – which, she said, suggested a degree of premeditated action – should be replaced, and, instead, 'dog biting incidents' (DBIs) should be used for the purpose of objective discussion.

Although the importance of discussing DBIs without sensationalising or scaremongering was recognised, it was acknowledged that the media were unlikely to follow suit. Speakers agreed that, by focusing primarily on severe or fatal bites, less severe bites (which comprise the majority of dog bites to humans) are often overlooked, even in the academic literature.

This misrepresentation is arguably bolstered by the current legislation relating to dog bites. Mr Cooper criticised the UK Government's reliance on the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, commenting: 'The only way the Dangerous Dogs Act will protect potential victims is if they have a copy to use as a shield!' Further to this, Professor Mills argued that this law did actual harm via its effects on public risk perception: 'If you label a dog as dangerous it implies that other dogs are not,' he said. Todd Hogue, professor of forensic psychology at the University of Lincoln, added that the hasty labelling of dogs should be replaced by evidence-based appraisal of risk for each individual case.

Similarly, there was concern over the Government's emphasis on 'tackling irresponsible dog ownership'. Dr Shepherd, who regularly serves as an expert witness and assessor of 'dangerous dogs', said that, in her experience, most legal cases were first time bites, which often occurred in the context of human conflict. She added that there was little evidence of deliberate training to bite. It was also mentioned that the majority of cases that were referred to behavioural counsellors were related to aggressive behaviour, proof that owners of dogs behaving in this way could not be automatically dismissed as irresponsible.

In addition to the conceptual criticisms of current legislation, Dr Shepherd suggested that there were 'many examples where the Animal Welfare Act [2006] is being contravened in seized kennelled dogs'. To illustrate her point, she showed video footage of dogs, seized under Sections 1 and 3 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, whose welfare needs were not being met. She also suggested that these dogs often did not receive routine veterinary care.

Although speakers agreed that the current approach to assessing and managing DBIs as a public health issue was unsuitable and ineffective, the atmosphere at conference was hopeful. The potential for education is being realised in numerous ways, most notably through The Blue Dog Project ([www.thebluedog.org](http://www.thebluedog.org)). The Blue Dog intervention has been shown to increase knowledge of safe behaviour around dogs and improve the behaviour of young children around dogs for up to a year after training. Interestingly, Professor Meints noted that there were no effects of dog ownership on children's performance. 'Dog savvy' children were equally likely to make unsafe decisions as children from non-dog owning families, she said.

The prevention of dog bites to children was a prevalent theme throughout the conference, with references to the innovative 'Put the Camera Down' campaign, which aims to discourage putting children and dogs into unsafe interactions for the purposes of pictures or videos. This phenomenon was neatly summarised by Victoria Stilwell as 'risks for likes', referring to the popularity of 'cute' or 'funny' child-dog interactions on social media. Children's typical behaviour compounded this issue, explained Professor Meints, as they had a tendency to want to hug and kiss dogs. Additionally, her research indicated that children often mistook canine snarls or bared teeth for smiles.

Misunderstanding aggressive behaviour is not limited to children, of course. Professor Mills stressed that 'growling is good' as punishing growling and other attempts by dogs to communicate could suppress these behaviours, and lead to bites that happened seemingly without warning. Other low-level aggressive behaviours were described, with Dr Shepherd's 'ladder of aggression' being cited as an excellent educational resource for adults.

The audience also took part in an interactive exercise, identifying the emotional basis of aggressive behaviour under Professor Mills' instruction. In addition, they learned of the ways in which muscular pain manifests as aggressive behaviour, from canine physiotherapist Louise Swindlehurst. They also heard how aggressive behaviour can be treated or prevented in individual cases from clinical animal behaviourist David Ryan and dog trainer Nando Brown.

The conference provided a forum in which future preventative measures could be discussed. Professor Hogue emphasised the need for an evidence base upon which to build a reliable assessment tool for predicting aggressive behaviour. This would include consideration of 'non-dog' influences, including owner, environmental and contextual factors, he said. Dr Shepherd agreed, stating that 'for any other public health issue, epidemiology would be considered of paramount importance' and adding that, in the interim, there was scope for many more professionals to adhere to the risk assessment guidelines provided by the European Society of Veterinary Clinical Ethology.

Overall, it is hoped that the awareness, discussion and collaboration instigated by the National Dog Bite Prevention and Behaviour conference will be a springboard for positive change in the UK's approach to addressing dog bites. However, this can only be achieved if DBIs are understood more widely as a complex public health issue, requiring professional and academic collaboration in line with 'One Health' principles.